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GOVERNMENT BY BUMPER STICKER?

Anybody who's ever been to a national plowing contest knows there's another contest going on at the same time--a contest for the votes of Farmbelt America.

Presidents, vice presidents, senators, governors, secretaries of agriculture, incumbents and challengers--you name them. Since 1939 you've heard them all.

Somebody from the administration in power comes out here and ticks off a long list of things that the administration claims it has done for the farmer.

And then somebody from the opposition shows up with another list of everything it says hasn't been done.

It's an old game. And I'm tempted to play it. Because I've got a list and I'm proud of it.

I could talk about how well our farm programs are working.

I could talk about how farm exports are setting new records every year.

I could talk about farm prices and how they're running 26 percent above 1976 and 14 percent over last year.

I could talk about how net farm income climbed 40 percent last year and how this year it will rise again.

I could say all that and something more. I could say--because it's true--that the Carter administration can take a lot of credit for that record.

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Remarks prepared for delivery by Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland, before the National Plowing Contest, Marshalltown, Iowa, August 28, 1979

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Jimmy Carter took office determined to do two things for farmers--give them more freedom and end boom and bust cycles. He's done both. The farmer-owned grain reserve was his idea. And it worked. Beefing up the effort to sell more American farm products overseas--instead of embargoing sales--was his idea. And it worked.

So I could say a lot about these accomplishments...and tomorrow I will.

But tonight I'm going to talk about something else. I'm going to talk about the education of Bob Bergland.

I'm sure that some of you figure I've still got a lot to learn...and you're right. But you've got to remember I started with a handicap.

The truth is that there are only two members of Jimmy Carter's Cabinet who never finished college. I'm one of them. I had to drop out and go home to work the farm.

Those were tough years. Every time we had a crop failure I had to head south to find a winter job.

So I used to sit on that tractor seat up there in Roseau County, Minnesota, and measure everything that happened in Washington or St. Paul--every law that was passed, every government action that was taken--in terms of what it meant to Bob Bergland--and his family--and his farm.

If it helped us--that was enough. And if what helped us was unfair to someone else, well that wasn't my worry.

I guess that's natural enough. After all, a man's first obligation is to survive and provide for his family. But in our system of government someone, somewhere in authority has to balance the account. Someone has to make sure no one benefits too much at someone else's expense.

I started to learn that lesson when the good people of my Congressional district elected me to the House of Representatives. All of a sudden I had to worry about the welfare of a lot of people--not just farmers like the Berglands, but town folk, businessmen, and professional people, young people, old people, and consumers.

That was the first lesson--but it was only half-learned. I still had tunnel vision.

It was too easy to judge every bill and every administrative action in terms of what they meant only to the people of my district. If it was good for them--fine. If it was good for them, but bad for people in other parts of the country...well, that was someone else's worry, wasn't it?

Well, for the past two and a half years I've sat at the Cabinet table with the one man who has to worry about every American everywhere. And now the lesson has finally come home.

The President of the United States is the only man responsible to all of his countrymen all of the time and for all of his countrymen all of the time.

He's got the toughest, loneliest job in the world, my friends.

And he isn't getting much help from the rest of us!

Never have our problems been so many and so complex.

Never have just and fair or even clear-cut solutions been harder to find.

Never has it been so difficult to balance the interests of regions and states and groups of Americans.

Never has the challenge been greater to keep this country militarily strong yet bring an end to the insane arms race.

And there is a unique set of factors at work in 1979 that makes the job even tougher.

Some of these factors are obvious to everyone.



Inflation is one. We inherited inflation from the Vietnam war years. Before we could get it under control, the energy crisis came along and heated it up even more.

The end of cheap and plentiful petroleum threw a brand new monkey wrench into the economic machinery, and that's the big reason why inflation has been so tough to lick.

And we're not only running out of petroleum. In some parts of the country water is in short supply. In other areas clean air is at a premium. In still others we're losing more and more good cropland, rangeland and topsoil. These aren't just local or regional problems. In time they'll affect the whole country.

Let's talk about some other factors that are making the job of governing this country so tough.

A minute ago I confessed to having tunnel vision on some issues when I served in the Congress. The temptation to cater to local interests--sometimes at the expense of national interests--has always been a fact of life on Capitol Hill. Today it's a harder fact than ever before, because there's not much left to counter that temptation.

Think about this for a minute: Who lobbies Congress for all of the people? Only the President, because he's the only one with a national constituency.

There was a time when a President had a lot of influence with the Congress. When he spoke for the people, the Congress listened.

But thanks to the Vietnam war and Watergate, this is no longer the case--even when the President's political party is the majority party in the Congress.

Let me add to this point, because it's far more important than many of us think.

Our system of government can't work without a strong two-party political system. The country is too big and it's too diverse. There has to be a mechanism to focus common beliefs and interests. That mechanism is the political party.

It's the overall philosophy of the party in power that gives purpose and direction to government. And this is what voters are called upon to judge every four years.

Political parties serve another purpose. They teach us the value of principles, for one thing. But they also teach us the value of compromise. There simple has to be a willingness to tolerate different views within the party and to stand by the party platform--even if not in full agreement with it--in order to advance a general political philosophy.

That's the way it used to be. Before the parties began to lose appeal and influence. Before a thousand and one special interest, single-issue, simple answer groups sprang up in the last few years to take over the traditional role of the political parties and tug the voter and the candidate and the government itself in a thousand and one directions.

Sure, we've always had special interest groups in this country. But in the last three or four years the number has skyrocketed. Not only have they increased by number, they've increased in influence. They have mastered the computerized mailing technique, reaching thousands of potential voters where they once reached hundreds, raising millions of dollars where they once raised thousands, triggering an avalanche of messages to the White House and the Congress with one push of a computer key.

I'm not saying that everything special interest groups ask for is wrong or bad for the country. Of course it isn't. But what I am saying is this: By definition special interest, single issue groups are one-dimensional. They push their own special interest, or single issue, and too often without much regard for the consequences.

There are some real dangers here.

If government is tugged and pushed in a thousand and one directions, how can it maintain purpose and direction?

When candidates and office holders are elected or defeated on the basis of how they stood on a single issue--instead of on their character and ability and total record--how can we improve or even maintain the caliber of this country's leadership?

Above all, this country needs leaders at every level of government who understand the complexity of today's problems, who understand the dangers of simplistic solutions, who know very well that you can't run this country on slogans and bumper stickers!

We need leaders in the state houses and the Congress who see through the deceptive simplicity of Food for Crude...who understand that the oil exporting countries can buy grain elsewhere on the world market if we raise our prices unreasonably...who understand that those same countries can switch consumption from wheat and corn to rice if they have to...who understand that matching food prices to crude prices will price us right out of the market, hurt our farmers, aggravate the imbalance of trade, and drive up the rate of inflation.



We need leaders at every level who understand that Jimmy Carter supports gasohol development because the concept holds real promise. But those leaders must also understand that gasohol will only help ease the energy crunch when it can be produced with less energy than it yields...and that its development should never force our country to choose between using grain for food or using grain for fuel.

We need leaders throughout the country who understand that foreign investors aren't the only--or even the major--culprits behind land inflation. Check any register of deeds office in the country and you'll find that almost all land transfers are between neighbors.

We need leaders who see the contradiction in the simultaneous demands to "Get Government Off Our Backs" and "Give Us 90 Percent of Parity." You can't have 90 percent of parity without involving the government far more than the government is involved in today's farm programs.

Slogans and bumper stickers not only deceive by premise...they raise false hopes and expectations.

Well, if the answer isn't slogans and bumper stickers, what is it?

It's hard work. Hard work digging out every fact and every bit of information. It's weighing options as honestly as we can. It's trying our best to guard against unforeseen consequences and counterproductive results. It's accepting once and for all that no solution to any major problem is going to satisfy everyone...that the best we can hope for are solutions that are as fair as possible to everyone concerned. Most important, it's looking ahead. We can't turn the clock back. The world has turned. The nation has changed. What worked yesterday, won't work today...and surely not tomorrow.

And that brings me to my final point.

Earlier I said the Carter administration could take a lot of credit for the economic gains in farmbelt America in the last couple of years. And it can.

But we aren't satisfied. The job isn't done. As well as today's farm programs are working, they are flawed. Like farm programs of the past, they still treat all farms alike. They don't confront the specific problems of farms that differ by size, by type, by location, by ownership and control. What's more, like earlier farm programs, today's programs are still reactive in nature. At any one time there are 10 or 20 or more of the 144 commodities affected by farm programs that are in some kind of trouble. The remedies are patchwork and temporary and sometimes politically expedient. They treat surface symptoms--not underlying causes.

What is most important, however, is the fact that today's programs will not meet the needs of tomorrow's agriculture--because tomorrow's agriculture is sure to be quite different from the agriculture we know today.

We know we're going to have to produce more than ever before. World food demand will increase by 50 percent in the next two decades. How do we meet this challenge with less petroleum, less water, less topsoil, less cropland, less rangeland...and higher farm production costs?

Water scarcity and price competition with industry and housing development for what water is available will decide what kind of agriculture is practiced in the more arid parts of the country.

We continue to lose twice as much valuable topsoil as nature replaces every year; we're sustaining an annual net loss of 1.5 million acres a year of available cropland; and our rangeland continues to deteriorate.

Meanwhile, energy costs alone now take 10 percent or more of the average farmer's gross income and will probably double in the next five years. Land prices increased 14 percent last year. Other farm production costs rose 8.5 percent, about the rate of inflation, and will be up substantially again this year.

Research, national policy and farm programs all will have to face up to these problems and do it soon.

But beneath these acute concerns lie some serious questions about the fundamental structure of our food and agriculture system...questions that bear directly on how well we can respond to the food production challenges of the future and to the overall needs of rural America.

These questions involve the ownership and control of agricultural land, the technological needs of different size and type farms in different locations, the social and economic characteristics of today's farm operators and farm owners, the organization and control of the markets where farmers buy their production supplies and sell their products. Who makes production and marketing decisions? Who benefits most and who benefits least from federal farm programs?

To help answer these questions, I have ordered the Department of Agriculture to carry out, in the next year and a half, intensive research and analysis in cooperation with farm organizations, rural leaders, land grant colleges, foundations and other individuals and institutions with an interest in this subject.

At the same time, I've called for a national discussion about what kind of agriculture we need--and want--in the years ahead. To open this discussion, I'm going to chair ten public meetings throughout the country late this fall.

My hope is that the research, the analysis and the public discussion will make it possible for us to compile the most comprehensive and reliable data ever assembled before the next farm bill is taken up by the Congress.

There's a reason for this, and it goes back to the central point of this talk.

To meet today's problems and tomorrow's challenges, we have to know what we're talking about; we have to know hard fact as well as we can know hard fact; we need to measure every possible consequence of every possible action.

Even so, we're bound to make mistakes.

All I can promise you is this:

The mistakes won't be so many, nor nearly so costly, as the blunders that would be made if we ever let slogans and bumper stickers take the place of policies and programs.

Thank you.

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